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ABSTRACT

When students are learning to write, one-to-one teacher-student conversations taking place around the students' writing and writing processes are especially important. Two examples illustrate the multiple and connected processes of reading and writing that are associated with composing in a high school English class. The first conversation, in a ninth-grade English class, lasts one minute nineteen seconds and is "squeezed in" while the student is engaged in other class work. Collaboration permeates the conversation as the participants build on one another's offers of information, overlapping turns, sometimes completing each other's sentences. The second conversation, from an eleventh-grade American Literature class, occurs as a conference for which the student signed up to review the first draft of an essay. In the context of these one-to-one conversations, participants shape together a process of (1) analyzing real-world experience; (2) negotiating between real-world experience and text rendition; (3) generalizing from the specifics of experience into more universal truths; (4) generalizing from the specifics of the student's writing experience to more universal truths about the student's own writing process; and (5) negotiating between teacher's and student's points of view. Through the dynamic of even brief conversation, students may construct themselves as writers in the world of writers, as readers in the world of readers, and as readers/writers in the world of writers/readers. (TD)

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Observations of High School Students Learning to Write

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The Social Construction of Writer as Reader
Observations of High School Students Learning to Write

Today I want to look at collaboration of a kind, realized as one-to-one teacher-student conversations. The conversations take place around the students' writing and writing processes, around already-written text in one case and soon-to-be written text in the other--and for this reason they may be recognized as teacher-student writing conferences. I want to bear in mind when looking at these pedagogical collaborations that conversations themselves are intrinsically collaborative events. Not only do they assume that participants will mutually address topics that concern them both, but, perhaps more centrally, conversations embody give-and-take at multiple linguistic levels. This dimension seems especially important when students are learning to write, for writing is a process that depends on an intimate, often tussling give-and-take, the give-and-take that continually inheres between writer and eventual reader; conversants who have as their focus the writing that one of them is producing enact this give-and-take as they encounter one another through the medium of that writing. Writing conference conversation, in effect, forces a kind of reader-writer collaboration.

The writing conferences that I want to look at encompass the multiple and connected processes of reading and writing that we associate with composing in a high school English class as

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students write about the literature they're studying as part of their class work. The first conference is from a ninth-grade English class, taught by Mr. Peterson, whose writing conferences with his students I've studied in detail. The second is from an eleventh grade American literature class taught by Mrs. Vance, whose classroom work I'm just beginning to analyze. I need to emphasize that the conference from her classroom is a tip of an iceberg for me of processes that my research colleagues and I are just beginning to sort through. I hope that the two conferences--different teachers and different students--taken together, will give a broader sense both of writing conference and of collaboration than I think is traditionally held and shed some light onto the interconnections between talk, writing, and reading in the special context of the high school English classroom, where writing is often writing about literature, and where, not incidentally, talk about a student's writing, writing conferences, often occurs while the class buzzes around the conversants and thus may admit of little privacy, and where writing conference conversations are often held "on the fly" as teacher and student snatch one or two minutes to "go over" a student's individual writing before they return to the general concerns of the whole class.

The first conversation is between Mr. Peterson and ninth-grader Gina. Gina has been told throughout her schooling that she is a good student and a good writer, and that is the way she she thinks of herself. Part of being in class for Gina includes

sharing her ideas with other students and helping them with their writing. She's in this sense a mature ninth-grader, and her conference should probably be seen in that light. The conference that we'll see is typical for this classroom, and from my experience it is typical of other classrooms as well: it lasts one minute nineteen seconds--it is short--and it occurs while Gina is engaged in other class work--it is "squeezed in" to the program. This conference occurs prior to Gina's doing any writing, during a period of idea-generating. For the assignment around which this conference takes place, Mr. Peterson wants students to write a "practice" character study, a paragraph-long sketch of a character in Great Expectations. The students are to distinguish in their writing those characteristics that reflect their opinions about the character they are writing about as opposed to those that reflect facts. As preparation for this writing, students work in small groups of three or four discussing descriptions in Great Expectations, deciding whether the narrator, Pip, is delivering in these descriptions his opinions, or whether he is conveying facts. The text that mediates the conversation between Mr. Peterson and Gina, then, is in part the book Great Expectations and in part Gina's lurking unwritten text that this talk is meant to help envision--a nice mixture of reading and writing.

Gina and her peers work in their small group and they leaf through their copies of Great Expectations, discussing the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Hubble. Mr. Peterson is checking on

the group's progress when Gina begins a conversation with him. Gina speaks first [OVERHEAD #1], and this first turn has a broad inititating function. It not only grabs Mr. Peterson's attention but prescribes the topic of their talk--it states the THESIS of the conference:

(1) G: There's . . ok. There's a whole description of Mr. 'n Mrs. Hubble. /yeah right/ There's a whole description of them here. That . . um most of them seem to me to be um Pip's opinion. I mean-

"Let's see" [Peterson says, in Turn 2], a kind of tacit agreement to buy into the conference that Gina's thesis has set up. Gina overlaps this reply:

(3) G: Somebody else may not think that [THAT THE DESCRIPTION IS OPINION, THOUGH SHE'S READING IT THAT WAY], and Mr. Peterson begins to read from Great Expectations, in effect initiating the next phase of their conversation, what can be seen as the ANALYSIS of the initiating thesis [OVERHEAD #2]:

(4) P: "I remember Mrs. Hubble as a little curly-haired person", [HE READS]

[Here their conversation is interrupted by Rhonda, another student in the group. Rhonda has been listening to Gina and Mr. Peterson talk, and she interjects, "That's what the book is about, his opinion mostly, I mean we really don't know- " Mr. Peterson acknowledges Rhonda's contribution, then continues with Gina. Note how Gina's words echo Rhonda's--this conference has multiple input]

(5) G: But I mean it's like the whole book is opinion really.

(6) P: (to Gina) But look. This is not- (consulting the book) She's curly haired. [INDICATING THAT THIS TRAIT IS PRETTY MUCH OBJECTIVE FACT]

(7) G: Ok.

(8) P: All right.

AND GINA SAYS:

(9) G: (consulting the book) She wore- she wore a sky blue outfit, (to Mr. Peterson) ok. [ALSO FACT]

(10) P: Yeah, right, that's right.

[OVERHEAD #3]

(11) G: Ok. (reads from book) "Who held a conventionally juvenile position", (to Mr. Peterson) That's-

(12) P: Um-- I'd-

(13) G: I don't know,=

[THEY'RE KIND OF THINKING TOGETHER HERE]

(14) P: =I would put that with her just her appearance. [LIKE CURLY-HAIRED, IT'S A FACT] Right. I don't want /yeah/ to make <u>too</u> much of the fact that it's uh--

[

(15) G: it's . . judgmental. [FINISHING HIS SENTENCE]

[

BUT PETERSON OVERLAPS HERE:

(16) P: She looked juvenile, right? /ok--/ Put juvenile in quotes, see.

(17) G: Uh huh--

(18) P: Right. Cause that's not- that is judgmental in a way.

Collaboration permeates throughout this conversation as the participants build on one another's offers of information, overlapping turns, sometimes completing one another's sentences. They engage in a kind of inference exchange, that is, as they assume turns at consulting from Great Expectations--"She's curly-haired," "She wore a sky-blue outfit"--they each invite the other to share in a process whereby they "read into" the selected passages the notion that indeed some of the description may really be objective fact.

This process begins almost immediately. After Gina repeats her concern that "the whole book is opinion really" (turn 5), Mr. Peterson counters this reading of the novel--"But look. This is not- " (turn 6), and points to a description that he implies is not opinion: "She's curly-haired." With her "Ok" (turn 7), Gina appears to acknowledge that "curly-haired" is more fact than opinion, and she herself, as a reader, discovers another piece of information in the book that conforms to this same perception--"She wore a sky-blue outfit, ok." This brief exchange appears to establish for Gina a framework for sorting fact from opinion, and together with Mr. Peterson she can now ponder over another description that is less clear-cut: when she reads, "who held a conventionally juvenile position," and begins her assessment of the description, "That's-" she is unsure and cuts herself off (turn 11); Mr. Peterson starts to contribute his assessment, "Um- - I'd-" but also apparently unsure cuts himself off in the same

manner (turn 12); Gina has another go at it, "I don't know" (turn 13); and Mr. Peterson chimes in, "I would put that with just her appearance," which is to say, he would call the description factual, not wanting to force an interpretation that the description is an opinion, or as he says, not wanting "to make too much of the fact that it's--" (turn 14), a statement that Gina herself completes for him, overlapping his words, "it's judgmental" (turn 15). One might well argue that "conventionally juvenile position" is indeed judgmental, and this was one of the debatable points that Mr. Peterson himself detected when he reviewed the tape of this conference with me later on. In the course of conversation he seems to change his mind, for he overlaps Gina's words with the suggestion that "juvenile" be written in quotes, that the description is indeed "judgmental in a way" (turn 18).

Through the give-and-take of conversation, through the enacted internal "debate" over how to interpret the descriptions in Great Expectations, Gina and Mr. Peterson appear simultaneously to read the book, the writing assignment, and each other. As conversation unfolds, so does the lesson, and gradually Gina's original belief that everything in Great Expectations is only Pip's opinion comes to be modified as she and Mr. Peterson both discover where to distingish fact from opinion. As the CODA to this conference suggests [OVERHEAD #4], Gina and Mr. Peterson may wind up seeing things in pretty much the same way [note their echoing "yeahs."]. On this premise Gina

can write her paragraph, which is to say, she can slip from her role as reader of other's text to writer of her own, still sorting fact from opinion in the process. It is perhaps not surprising that in the paragraph she produces about the Hubbles, she is careful to mark her opinions about them explicitly. She introduces the notion that the Hubbles are "over-the-hill snobs", for example, with the disclaimer, "This is purely my opinion."

. . .

Now, I want to turn to the conference between eleventh-grader Kenneth and Mrs. Vance. Kenneth provides a nice contrast to Gina in that his conference is about writing that's already been done. Also, Kenneth is a different kind of class participant than Gina, again something to keep in mind when looking at his conference talk. He is a relatively quiet student in Mrs. Vance's 11th grade American Literature class. He seldom volunteers in class discussion. He does not seem to be a "helper" as is Gina is; in fact, he often seems ready to be distracted from the work of Mrs. Vance's class and to distract Stacey, who sits behind him: the two of them often do the geometry homework they have in another class together, even working on problems during the five or ten-minute stretches that Mrs. Vance gives the class for writing in their journals.

The conversation between Kenneth and Mrs. Vance is more formally proscribed than the one between Gina and Mr. Peterson. Kenneth is one of several people to sign up for a conference with Mrs. Vance after writing the first draft of his essay on the

novel White Dawn. The reading of White Dawn took place both at home and in class, with much teacher explication, journal writing, and class discussion, and many group projects centered around the book, which, in a nutshell, is about three European whalers who in the year 1896 survive a storm at sea and find themselves rescued by a small group of Eskimos. The story reveals a dramatic culture clash as the foreigners and the Eskimo villagers attempt to live day-to-day with one another and in doing so work tragic changes on the traditional Eskimo life. In their essays, the students are to decide who among the many characters in the novel are to blame for the tragedies that befall the Eskimos.

It is already the fourth month of the semester, the class has already done a lot of writing, mostly about the literature that they have been reading, but the White Dawn essay seems to stymie almost everyone. As is the case with the rest of the students in the class, Kenneth's draft comes back to him marked with his teacher's comments and the assumption by both teacher and student that a rewrite is in order. Although she is in the habit of assigning grades to early drafts, Kenneth's draft is so dismally in need that Mrs. Vance has refrained from putting any grade on it, a situation that makes him extremely uncomfortable.

It is the last 20 minutes of class. Mrs. Vance has set up conference space at a round table in the front corner of the classroom, and one by one she calls on students to discuss their rough drafts in order to help them plan their revisions. She

talks to each student for two to three minutes, often ending with invitations to continue talking after the student has a rewrite ready to discuss. It is clear from all these conferences, and is illustrated in Mrs. Vance's first utterance to Kenneth--"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?" [OVERHEAD #5]--that she sees herself here in a kind of service role, which is to offer help to students who have been having a difficult time with a difficult assignment, in effect, to help them out of a mess. She herself noted to me several times in conversation that the White Dawn assignment was tough for everyone, and she wanted to give the students as much help with the writing as she could.

Mrs. Vance opens the conference with Kenneth with her offer of help. Kenneth registers concern about not getting a grade on his draft, they discuss grades for awhile, and then get into the heart of the conference as Mrs. Vance repeats and narrows her offer to help: "Now what can I do to help you make it clear?", she says (turn 1), "You know what you did wrong?" (turn 3) and Kenneth responds, initiating the THESIS of their conversation [OVERHEAD #6]: "Yeah. Because I didn't state my thesis clearly (turn 4). This remark is essentially a reiteration of Mrs. Vance's written comments on his paper, and it isn't at all clear that Kenneth understands what's really the matter with his thesis. But Mrs. Vance responds, "If you don't know where you're going, you can't possibly get there (turn 5), and Kenneth agrees, "True. I guess that's it." They are very much in the writing here, Kenneth's problem as they discuss it is a writer's problem.

He doesn't have a clear thesis, and without a clear thesis, (a) a reader can't know how to read his paper (Mrs. Vance's reading was so difficult that she couldn't even give the essay a grade), and, (b) perhaps more importantly--notice how Mrs. Vance marks the importance with a metaphor--the problem is a real writer's problem--without a thesis, Kenneth doesn't give himself an explicit plan for laying out the rest of his essay. In the next several conversational turns [OVERHEAD #7], we see Mrs. Vance inviting Kenneth out of his essay and into the analysis phase of their conversation. "All right. Now tell me in your own words what your thesis is," she says (turn 7). She is inviting him, in effect, to stop the writing process in order to read--not so much what he's written, but to read his ideas, to read his reading of White Dawn, which is the primary the experience behind the writing. And he does: "Well, um," he says, "The break-up of the family was caused by the three foreigners" (turn 8). It is when they are out of the essay that conversation builds, when they have some give-and-take about ideas, ideas that are not yet written, but that Mrs. Vance seems to want to read into Kenneth's next draft. Mrs. Vance, picking up on the idea that the foreigners caused the break-up of the Eskimo family, requests that he expand the idea, "What about them in particular? Any three foreigners that came into this camp would cause these same problems, or was it something in the nature of those three men?" (turn 9). An important question. Not about Kenneth's writing, but about White Dawn. From writer, to reader of his own writing,

to reader of the novel, Kenneth is moved via conversation into these multiple and interconnected roles. In his role as reader of White Dawn he is stumped. "Well, they come from like um I don't know. It's hard to describe their=" (turn 10), Mrs. Vance cuts him off--"=Yeah, see if you can't say it clearly then you can't write it clearly. You see what I mean?" (turn 11), Kenneth appears to agree, ("Yeah") (turn 12), and now in a series of questions and answers Mrs. Vance elicits from Kenneth what he does know about the book. In this series of questions and answers, Kenneth offers up information, and Mrs. Vance accepts his offers, recasting his words at times, packaging them in interesting prose, and delivering back to Kenneth his own ideas. In doing so, she in effect gives him a reading of his reading which, by implication, is the plan for his writing.

(13) V: O.K. So, do you think that they share equally in the problem, all three? [THAT IS, ALL THREE FOREIGNERS]

(14) K: Yes.

(15) V: O.K. So what about them? What about the way that they live was a problem for the way the Eskimos lived?

(. . .)

(16) K: Pilee. [ONE OF THE CHARACTERS] /um hm/ He's not helping out and he doesn't go hunting and all that.=

(17) V: =O.K. So he's lazy. [DELIVERS HIS WORDS BACK TO HIM, REPACKAGED]

(18) K: Yes.

(19) V: And he basically has a take attitude rather than a

give? [MORE REPACKAGING]

(20) K: Yeah that's it.=

(21) V: =He's a user rather than a giver? [AGAIN] /um hm/ O.K. So Pilee's lazy attitude is a problem? O.K. What else?

[OVERHEAD #9]

(22) K: Uh well, Portagee [ANOTHER CHARACTER] is /um hm/ sometimes he kinda helps /um hm/ and sometimes he just wants to play around with his women.

(23) V: Yes. So maybe um his um his preference for sex gets him in trouble. [REPACKAGING]

(24) K: True. (laughs)

Now they come to Dagget, whom the Eskimos call Kakatak. Notice how the conversation gives Kenneth an opportunity to think about Dagget, and how in the give-and-take Mrs. Vance's repackaging of Kenneth's words leads him into making a key connection between the book and his own life:

[OVERHEAD #10]

(25) V: O.K.? O.K. What about Dagget? What about um Kakatak?

(26) K: Well, he tries to like adapt to the culture but /but/ MRS. VANCE ECHOES HIS "BUT," A SIGN OF SOME COMPATIBILITY OF THOUGHT PERHAPS . . . Well the time when he said no to Sarkak [SARKAK IS THE ESKIMO CHIEF].

(27) V: Uh. huh. Why is that such a problem for Sarkak? I don't get the feeling he would have been as upset with Portagee or Pilee. Why=

KENNETH LATCHES ONTO MRS. VANCE'S WORDS:

(28) K: =Well, Kakatak is like a son to him /yeah, exactly/

MRS. VANCE BUILDS ON THIS IDEA OF SON-NESS:

(29) V: Yeah. He was doing everything for him, right? /yeah/ What did he want in return?

(30) K: Some uh respect or=

AND NOW THEY'RE IN A KIND OF RHYTHM; NOTICE THE REPETITION OF AFFIRMATIONS --YEAH, UH HUH, THAT CONTINUE THROUGHOUT THIS EXCHANGE:

(31) V: =Yeah. Uh huh. And how does it feel when this kid screams "No!" at him?

(32) K: He feels down.

(33) V: Yeah. Like, hey wait a minute, I did everything for you, and what- it's you know it's like Argh.

AND NOW THE INSIGHT [OVERHEAD #11]:

(34) K: Like my parents.

(35) V: Yeah. Exactly. That's <u>exactly</u> it. How would <u>they</u> feel? Would they feel betrayed /yeah/ or abused and- O.K. so your premise is that [. . .] for certain characteristics in each of the foreigners there's a problem. For Pilee it's his laziness, for Portagee it's his sexual excess, and for Dagget it's his lack of you know when he stands up and shows lack of respect /respect/ disrespect. O.K. Perfect. Now isn't that a very clear paper?

WHILE AT THE SAME TIME WE ARE OUTSIDE THE PAPER, WE ARE NOW AGAIN

BACK INSIDE IT:

(36) K: Yeah.=

[OVERHEAD #12]

(37) V: =Yeah. [. . .] O.K. Now, what are you going to conclude? [AGAIN, A WRITER'S CONCERN, BUT TIED INTRICATELY TO KENNETH THE READER OF WHITE DAWN] <u>All</u> cultures are going to be destroyed when somebody else comes in?=

(38) K: =Yeah. . . . No. /No/ Well, because some cultures could adapt to /yeah/ certain cultures.

(39) V: And it was <u>these</u> characteristics of these men in this situation that complicated things?

(40) K: Yeah.

(41) V: O.K.

(42) K: <u>Yeah</u>!

(43) V: Yeah. (laughs)

AND NOW THE CODA [OVERHEAD #13]:

(44) K: I never thought of it like that before.

. . .

I believe that in Gina's and Kenneth's conferences there is a singular building process--the collaborative building, through conversation, not only of text but of knowledge about text, both student written text and text written by another author, literature, text written and text read. We see how conversation in effect enlarges already-written--as well as yet-to-be-written--text, and how it entails a discourse that has reader and writer

tangling at the core--with participants each performing multiple reader and writer roles in the process of their talk.

Gina and Mr. Peterson construct a reading of Great Expectations that unfolds in the conversational process--in one sense their reading from this book is their conversation. It is a reading that anticipates the reading-to-come of Gina's text-to-come, both her own reading of that text in her role as writer and Mr. Peterson's reading of it in his role as teacher and assignment giver. Together she and Mr. Peterson construe and reconstrue the text at hand, Great Expectations, by creating a discourse around it that will inform Gina's own composing.

For Kenneth, conversation unlocks writing the essay, but it does so also by unlocking the book. In clarifying his reading of White Dawn, in interacting with Mrs. Vance's reading of his reading, he clarifies his task as a writer, for their joint reading is implicitly the meat of his essay, not only the content of his essay, but also the structure.

In the context of these one to one conversations, participants shape together a process [OVERHEAD #14] of (a) analyzing real-world experience--"like my parents"--in order to translate this experience into a text world; (b) negotiating between real-world experience and text rendition--in Great Expectations, "conventionally juvenile position is judgmental in a way if real-world experience tells us anything--; (c) generalizing from the specifics of experience, both real-world and text-rendered, into more universal truths--not all cultures

are going to be destroyed when somebody else comes in, just when certain types of people do -- (d), generalizing from the specifics of the student's writing experience to more universal truths about the student's own writing process--"if you don't know where you're going, you can't possibly get there"; and (e) negotiating between teacher's and student's points of view, switching and comparing perspectives and attempting to find a creditable balance-- the boundary between fact and opinion for Mr. Peterson and Gina both turns out to be a fuzzy one.

One of the arguments that has been made in favor of the teacher-student writing conference in its more traditional aspect, which is to say as a prolonged and private conversation that occurs in an instructor's office, is its characteristically individualizing nature and, hence, its value to the process of learning to write. It appears that even brief conversations between teacher and student, in which privacy is a changing and unstable factor--Gina's conversation lasts less than a minute-and-a half and takes place amidst the talk of her peers--can constitute nonetheless individualized events that reflect the unfolding collaborations of their interlocutors. Through the dynamic of even brief conversation, students may construct themselves as writers in the world of writers, as readers in the world of readers, and as readers/writers in the world of writers/readers.

Moreover, in analyzing these conversations we see played out another central relationship--that between context and text.

Here, the collaborative enactment of conversation--the context--is one with the enactment of the reader-writer dynamic, which is to say, one with the collaborative enactment of text as text encompasses multiple experiences of reading and writing. All this suggests that the teacher-student writing conference as it can exist in the secondary school classroom can be a powerful vehicle for shaping students' participation in the discourse of writers and writing, a discourse multiply embedded with acts of reading, writing, and talk.